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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to test the hypothesis that the media emphasis of issues serves to set the agenda of public awareness of those issues. Data were obtained from telephone interviews during the 1976 United States Presidential campaign from 658 voters in Pennsylvania and California. The issues of unemployment, inflation, and crime were selected for analysis, and personal involvement with the issues was determined; groups were also divided into those with high and low amounts of exposure to both newspapers and television. Results indicated that the salient issues were unemployment, inflation, and crime, in that order; that for people with little media or personal contact with an issue there was also little awareness of the issue; and that people with high contact with an issue determined its importance without using the media, but they were exposed to a diverse media agenda, which may have pulled attention away from personal experience. (DF)

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COMPETING MODELS OF AGENDA-SETTING: ISSUE OBTRUSIVENESS VS. MEDIA EXPOSURE

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COMPETING MODELS OF AGENDA-SETTING: ISSUE OBTRUSIVENESS VS. MEDIA EXPOSURE*

Research on the influence of the mass media in creating issue awareness or salience among the public has largely focused on clarifying the broad concept of agenda-setting. As originally proposed by Shaw and McCombs (1972), the agenda-setting hypothesis states there is positive, causal relationship between what the mass media emphasize through prominence and display and, subsequently, what the public perceives to be the most salient issues of the day.[1]

It is not proposed that the agenda-setting process is an all powerful media effect. McCombs (1977, p.9) notes that while agenda-setting effects have been demonstrated, "they are not of consistent and major magnitude in all circumstances." The original Shaw and McCombs study illustrates this point. The sample was restricted to "undecided" voters in the 1968 Presidential campaign in Charlotte, North Carolina because it was reasoned this group would exhibit maximum agenda-setting effects.

Subsequently, considerable attention has been given to identifying contingent conditions for the agenda-setting process. This reflects both a need to scrutinize the original media agenda - public agenda relationship, and to further clarify the boundaries of the concept. (See for example, McCleod, Becker and Byrnes, 1974; McCombs and Weaver, 1973; Weaver and McCombs, 1978; and Winter, 1979).

Issue Obtrusiveness as a Contingent Condition:

In proposing a theory of "variable news media influence," Zucker (1978) argues the news media's influence is not the same for all issues. He distinguishes between the obtrusive and the non-obtrusive issue (p.228).

*The author is indebted to Professor Thomas E. Patterson, Dept. of Political Science, Syracuse University, for his guidance in the completion of this research.

This notion is based on the presumed amount of direct contact the audience has with an issue, independent of media contact. Zucker says, (p.227) "the less direct experience the people have with a given issue area (non-obtrusive) the more they will rely on the news media for information and interpretation in that area." In contrast, the media have minimal influence when people have direct contact with an issue.

Using this concept of obtrusiveness, and a measure of duration of media exposure, Zucker was able to demonstrate the influence of the news media in increasing the salience of non-obtrusive issues. He observed: "People today live in two worlds: a real world and a media world. The first is bounded by the limits of the direct experience of an individual and his acquaintances. The second spans the world, bounded only by the decisions of news reporters and editors." (p.239).

In reviewing the literature on contingent conditions, Winter (1979) notes: " ... the media do not operate in a vacuum: media and audiences are all integral parts of a larger social system. However, by providing the public with what Lippmann (1922) referred to as "the pictures in our heads," or what Tolman (1932) called our "cognitive maps," the media explain the world beyond our personal experiences." (p.33) (See also, Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976).

Eyal (1979) obtained empirical support for the importance of issue obtrusiveness from data on the 1976 Presidential election campaign. He initially found low correlations between media and public agenda of issues. However, a factor analysis of respondents' ranking of the most important issues and media mentions of issues revealed two groupings. Eyal argues these two groups of issues logically fall into Zucker's dichotomy of the

obtrusive and the non-obtrusive. Stronger support for the agenda-setting hypothesis was found for the non-obtrusive issues.

In a study of television network news and issue salience in 1974 and 1976, Iyengar (1979) did not find any evidence of agenda-setting effects. He argues the relationship between media agenda and public agenda may be spurious - the audience agenda and the television network agenda may both reflect real world cues.[2] However, he states, issues such as inflation, unemployment, crime, pollution, energy shortages, poverty and taxes have a "direct, tangible and often powerful impact on individual's lives." (p.13) The salience of these types of issues, he says, may simply be a function of the number of people they affect - regardless of media influence. Iyengar concludes, (p.14): " ... agenda-setting by the media may be limited to the more peripheral and remote issues which are beyond the reach of personal experience." The study does not directly refer to Zucker's concept of obtrusiveness.

In a study of the 1974 National election, Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (1980) note, (p. 18) that most agenda-setting research "ignores the obvious fact that issue concerns can and do arise from sources other than media exposure - notably from personal experiences, group perspectives and real-world conditions." These non-media factors will vary across individuals, across time, and across issues. The study examined single issue salience and media content, and the impact of interpersonal communication and real-world cues in respondents' communities. The authors report support for what they term an "audience-contingent effects" model: "media coverage interacts with the audience's pre-existing sensitivities to produce changes in issue concerns. Media effects are contingent on issue-specific audience characteristics." (p.45).[3]

Although the Erbring et. al. study does examine contact or experience with issues via real-world cues and interpersonal communication, the concept of obtrusiveness is not considered. The authors regard obtrusiveness as a "message" property.[4]

In the agenda-setting literature it is recognized that what one person perceives to be salient may be perceived by another as very unimportant. Thus, when considering the concept of obtrusiveness, it is not that the issue per se is necessarily obtrusive. No one would argue that what is obtrusive to one person is necessarily obtrusive to all, thus it may be erroneous to apply researcher's labels to issues. As research by Zucker, Eyal, and Erbring et. al. suggests, what is important is individual perceptions and contact or experience with the issue.

Further, the literature does not clearly differentiate between issue obtrusiveness and media exposure - how do they interact? The current study begins to explore this question.

The following simple model is proposed:[5]

FIGURE 1

		MEDIA CONTACT	
		High	Low
Personal Contact With Issue	High	A	B
	Low	C	D

For individuals in cell A and B issues would be obtrusive, while in cells C and D issues would be non-obtrusive. The question is: how do we measure obtrusiveness?

One way would be to ask respondents how much personal experience they have had with an issue. Respondents could then be asked what type of experience they had. An alternative, but restricted, approach is to try to identify those groups of people, from socio-demographic measures and other life indicators, for whom an issue should be obtrusive or non-obtrusive. For example, if a respondent is unemployed we would logically expect that it is an obtrusive issue for them. This is obviously a restricted definition of issue obtrusiveness but nonetheless it is in line with Zucker's original notion. This is the approach adopted in this study.

Hypotheses:

If issue obtrusiveness is a powerful factor in creating issue awareness, three exploratory hypotheses are suggested relating to the differences in perceived salience of an issue for the four groups of respondents defined by the model.

Obtrusive:

Low media users will consider obtrusive issues as equal or more important than will high media users.

Non-obtrusive:

High media users will consider non-obtrusive issues as more important than will low media users.

Obtrusive: Non-obtrusive.

Low media users will consider non-obtrusive issues as less important than high or low media users will consider obtrusive issues.

These hypotheses suggest a model in which a particular issue is most salient for individuals who are directly affected by that issue, and are

light media users.

An alternative model is also plausible. Individuals for whom a particular issue is obtrusive and who are heavy media users, will consider that issue most salient. This alternative model assumes media use is a form of experience which leads to increased salience when combined with direct issue contact.

For example, the obtrusive-high media group (Cell A, Figure 1) would consider the issue to be more important than the obtrusive-low media group (Cell B). Similar arguments would hold for comparing A with C, B with C.

Hence, in terms of relative salience for the four groups of respondents, two competing models are suggested, as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

Personal Contact With Issue	MEDIA CONTACT: High	MEDIA CONTACT: Low
Obtrusive	H-O	L-O
Non-Obtrusive	H-N	L-N

TEST MODEL	ALTERNATIVE MODEL
L-O > H-O	H-O > L-O
L-O > H-N	H-O > H-N
L-O > L-N	H-O > L-N
H-O > H-N	H-N > L-O
H-O > L-N	H-N > L-N
H-N > L-N	L-O > L-N

The test model gives more weight to issue obtrusiveness than media exposure, while the alternative gives more weight to media exposure. The two models differ in comparing L-O with H-O, L-O with H-N, and H-N with L-O.

The approach here is to examine the differences in perceived salience for a single issue for the four groups for both newspaper and television news exposure, and to test the competing models using a combined newspaper-television news exposure measure. No media content measures are used which is a departure from the traditional agenda-setting approach.

Data Sources:

The study involves secondary analysis of panel data collected by Patterson (1980) on the 1976 Presidential election. 658 eligible voters from Erie, Pennsylvania, and 578 from Los Angeles, California, were randomly selected for the panel.

Personal interviews were conducted in February, April, June, August and October. A telephone interview was conducted after the debates, and after the election. Full details of the design, attrition rates, and questionnaires, are given in Patterson's book. Of relevance here are the questions concerning issue salience, media use and measures of socio-demographic characteristics.

Issue salience was measured in February, April, June, August and October. The question asked respondents was:

> "Please think for a moment of the problems that face this country today. In your mind, what do you feel is the one most important problem that the national government in Washington should do something about?"

This differs from the usual agenda-setting question designed to measure

the audience agenda, specifically the intra-personal agenda. (See for example, Shaw and McCombs, 1977, pp. 171-2).

Three issues were selected for analysis - unemployment, inflation and crime. For each issue, the panel was divided into two groups: those for whom the issue would be obtrusive, and those for whom the issue would be non-obtrusive. As will be apparent, subsequent analyses often resulted in small sample sizes, particularly for the crime issue.

For the unemployment issue obtrusiveness was measured by responses to questions about the respondent's or the household employment situation. The obtrusive group included respondents who were unemployed; respondents in households where the principal wage earner was unemployed; respondents unemployed at the post-election telephone interview, and respondents who were employed but earning less than $5,000, that is, the marginally employed.

For the crime issue, obtrusiveness was measured by responses to the following:

> "In your immediate neighborhood, how safe is it for a person to walk around alone at night - very safe, somewhat safe, or not very safe?"

Those respondents answering "not very safe" were defined as the obtrusive group, while the non-obtrusive group were defined as those answering "safe." The question was asked at the post-election telephone interview.

For the inflation issue, obtrusiveness was measure by responses to a series of questions asked in August about the household financial situation. The obtrusive group included those not satisfied at all with their present financial situation; those who thought their financial situation would get worse in the year ahead; those not satisfied with their present financial situation and thought it stayed about the same during the past year, or

thought it would stay the same in the year ahead. The non-obtrusive group included all others. From these two groups all those respondents who had been defined as obtrusive for the unemployment issue were excluded.[6]

Media use questions were asked at each of the five personal interviews. Newspaper use was measured by the following question:

> "Most people don't have time or interest to read the entire newspaper. They normally read only certain parts such as the sports, comics, the news, the business pages, the women's pages and so on. How often do you read the news pages of your daily newspaper? Do you read the news pages regularly, somewhat often, only once in a while or almost never?"

Similarly, television news exposure was measured by the following question:

> "Although network news can be seen on weekends, the regular network news with Cronkite, Chancellor and Reasoner is televised only on the five weekdays, Monday through Friday. How many of the past five weekday evenings did you watch the network news?" [7]

Results:

Overall, the unemployment issue was consistently ranked as the most important issue throughout the year. Inflation ranked second at each of the five personal interviews. The crime issue appeared as the seventh most important issue in April, rose to fifth in June, and declined again to sixth and seventh in August and October.

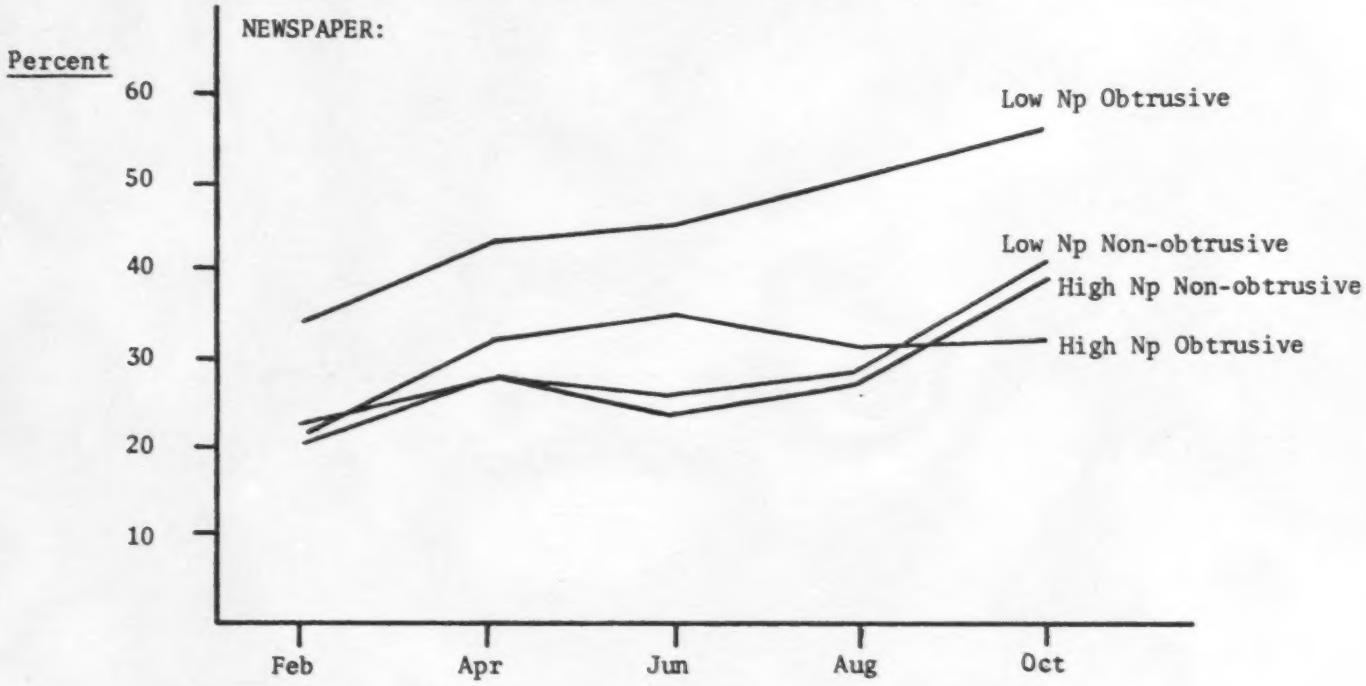
Following the model outline, the obtrusive and non-obtrusive groups for each issue at each time point were divided into high and low newspaper users, and high and low television users. (For the crime issue, this results in small sub-sample sizes).

Table 1 - About Here

TABLE 1

UNEMPLOYMENT:

Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Unemployment as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation, by Obtrusiveness and Newspaper Use



UNEMPLOYMENT:

Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Unemployment as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation, by Obtrusiveness and Television Use

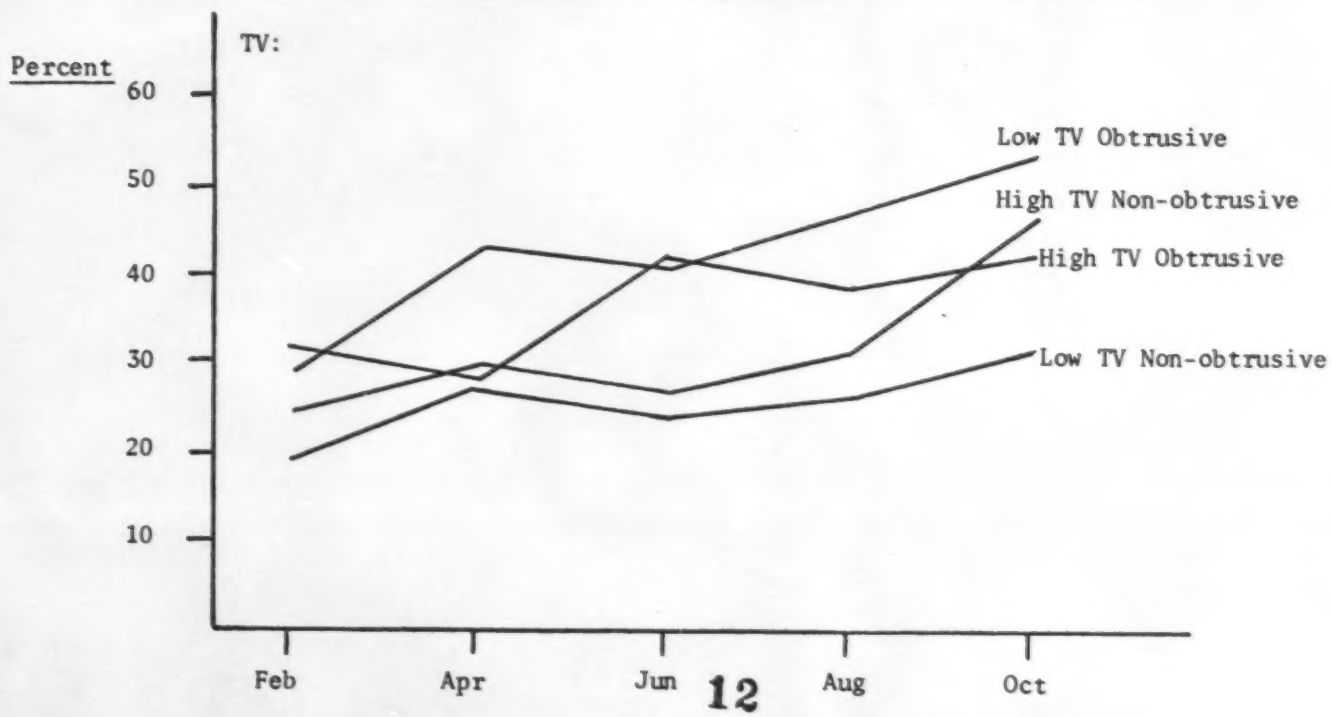


Table 1 graphs the percentage in each of the four groups - obtrusive high newspaper; obtrusive low newspaper; non-obtrusive high newspaper; non-obtrusive low newspaper - who mentioned unemployment as the most important problem facing the nation.

It is evident that those respondents classified as obtrusive for the unemployment issue, and who are low newspaper users, consistently mentioned unemployment as being more important than did the other three groups. For example, in October, nearly 60 percent of the obtrusive low newspaper group mentioned unemployment, compared to 33 percent of the high newspaper group, 39 percent of the non-obtrusive high newspaper group and 36 percent of the non-obtrusive low newspaper group. Over the five personal interviews there is support for the obtrusive hypothesis.

The evidence is not clear for the non-obtrusive hypothesis - there are small differences between the non-obtrusive high and low newpaper groups. However, the non-obtrusive low newspaper group considers the unemployment issue of lesser importance than does the obtrusive low newspaper group. And, the non-obtrusive low newspaper group consider unemployment of lesser importance than does the non-obtrusive high newspaper group, except in October. Thus, there is some support for the obtrusive: non-obtrusive hypothesis.

A similar analysis was carried out for television use, and the results are reported in Table 1. Apart from February and June, where the differences between the obtrusive groups are small, the obtrusive low television group considers the unemployment issue of more importance than do the other three groups. The obtrusive hypothesis is supported, and there is clearer support for the non-obtrusive and the obtrusive: non-obtrusive hypotheses.

The analyses for the crime issue for television and newspaper are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 - About Here

The obtrusive hypothesis for newspaper users for the crime issue is supported in 4 out of the 5 time periods, and the difference between the obtrusive high and low newspapers groups is small in February. For television, the obtrusive hypothesis is supported only in August. There appears to be clear support for the non-obtrusive and obtrusive: non-obtrusive hypotheses for both newspaper and television across all time periods, despite the small sub-sample sizes.

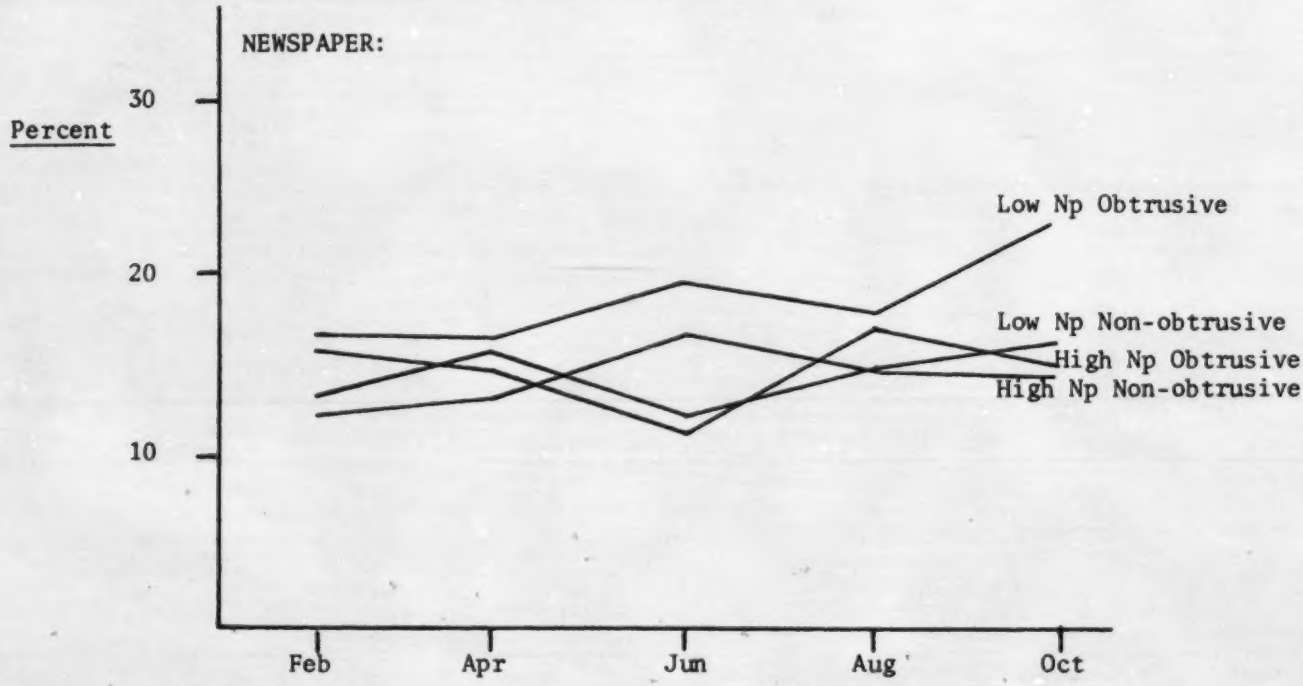
Table 3 - About Here

For the inflation issue (Table 3), the obtrusive hypothesis for newspaper is supported, although the differences are small in February and April. For television, the obtrusive hypothesis is supported in 4 out of the 5 time periods. The non-obtrusive hypothesis for newspaper users is not supported in June and August, but differences are small in February and October. The obtrusive: non-obtrusive hypothesis for newspaper is supported in 4 out of 5 time periods, with small differences in August and no support in June. For television, the obtrusive: non-obtrusive hypothesis is not supported.

TABLE 2

INFLATION:

Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Inflation as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation, by Obtrusiveness and Newspaper Use



INFLATION:

Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Inflation as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation, by Obtrusiveness and Television Use

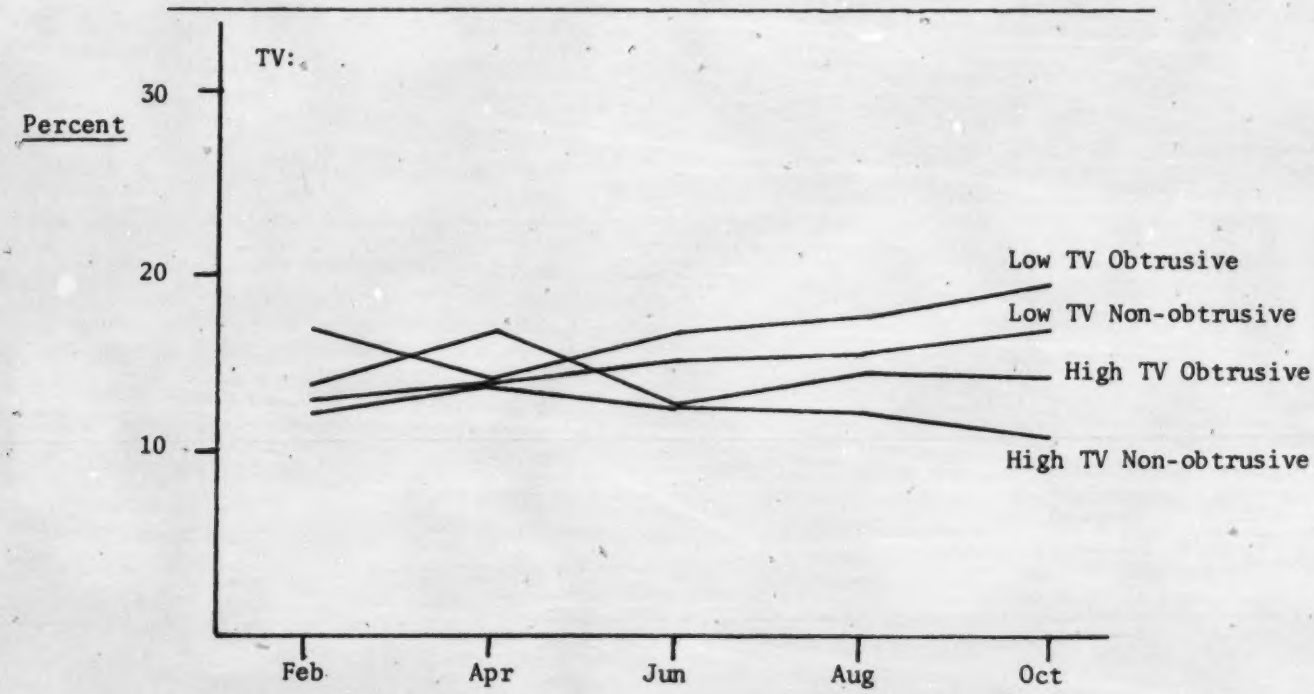
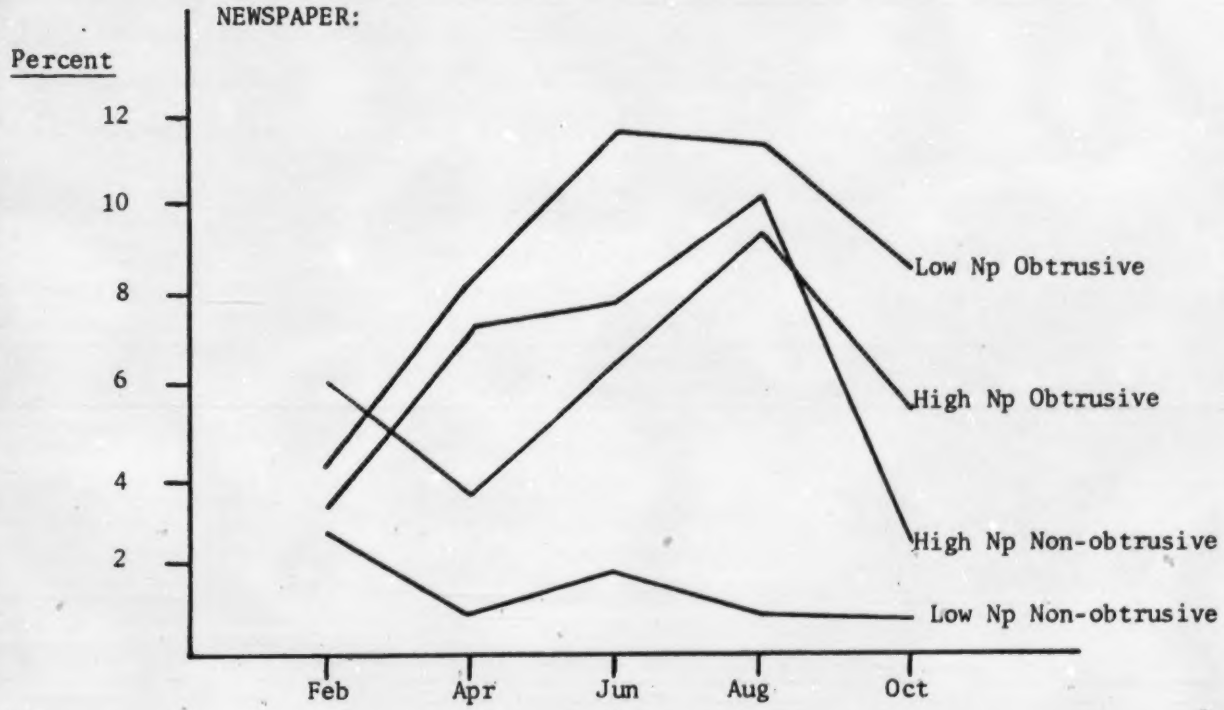


TABLE 3

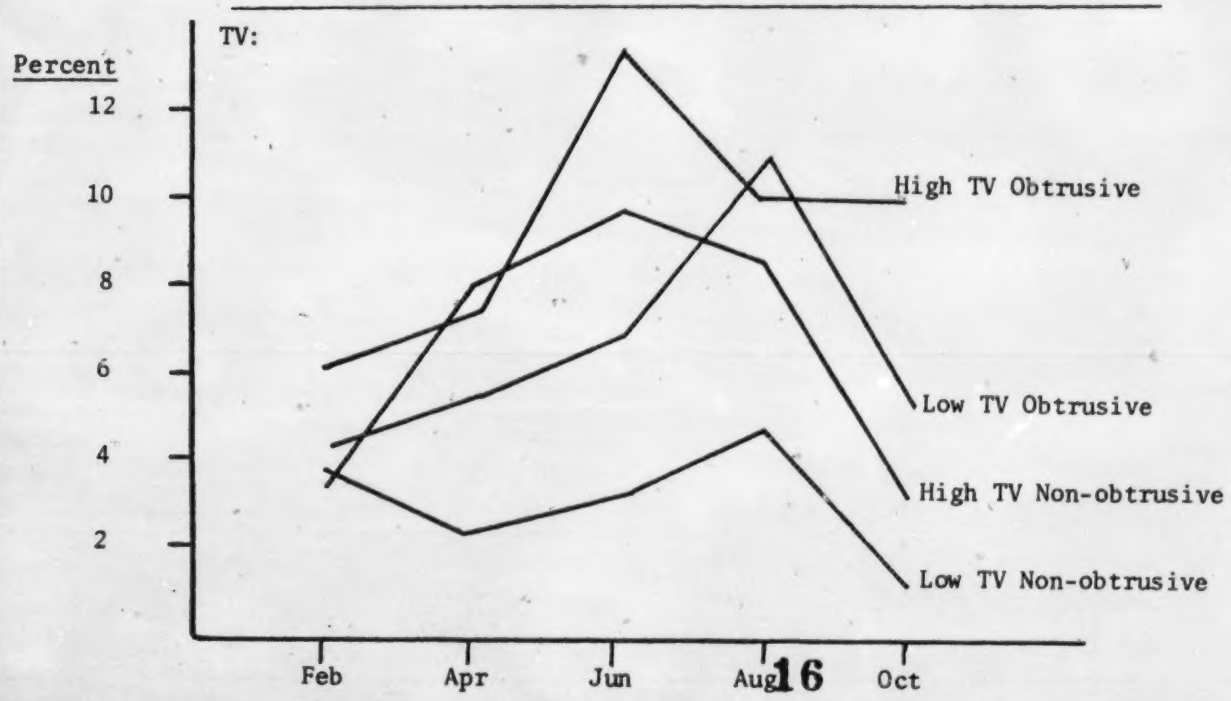
CRIME:

Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Crime as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation, by Obtrusiveness and Newspaper Use



CRIME:

Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Crime as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation, by Obtrusiveness and Television Use



In sum, what appears to emerge from this exploratory analysis is that:

1. Respondents for whom an issue is obtrusive, and who are low newspaper or television users, tend to consider the issue of more importance than do all other groups.

2. Respondents for whom an issue is non-obtrusive, and who are low television or newspaper users, tend to consider the issue of lesser importance than do the other three groups.

To test the competing models a combined index of media use was created. Partitioning the sample into the four groups resulted in small sample sizes for the obtrusive groups. A combined index of media use was used to increase sub-sample n's and thereby increase power for the testing of the two models.[8]

For each issue, the sample was divided into four groups - obtrusive high and low media use; and non-obtrusive high and low media use. Table 4 shows the proportion of respondents in each of the four groups who mentioned the issue under consideration as the most important facing the nation.

Table 4 - About Here

A test of the differences between proportions (Blalock, 1960, p. 178) was used to compare each of the six components of the two models. The results are reported in Table 5.

Table 5 - About Here

TABLE 4

Proportion of Respondents Mentioning the Issue as the Most Important Problem Facing the Nation, by Obtrusiveness and Media Use

	HIGH MEDIA USE				LOW MEDIA USE			
	Obtrusive		Non-Obtrusive		Obtrusive		Non-Obtrusive	
UNEMPLOYMENT		N		N		N		N
February	.2913	(30)	.2179	(100)	.3070	(35)	.2007	(58)
April	.3218	(28)	.2771	(115)	.4526	(43)	.2842	(81)
June	.3956	(36)	.2376	(101)	.4382	(39)	.2692	(77)
August	.3580	(29)	.2784	(108)	.5294	(45)	.2953	(75)
October	.3973	(29)	.3984	(153)	.6027	(44)	.3320	(84)
INFLATION								
February	.1333	(16)	.1312	(58)	.1818	(14)	.1074	(35)
April	.1407	(19)	.1444	(53)	.1905	(16)	.1284	(38)
June	.1151	(16)	.1353	(51)	.2234	(21)	.1744	(49)
August	.1678	(25)	.1375	(44)	.2115	(22)	.1489	(35)
October	.1357	(19)	.1703	(54)	.2727	(24)	.1555	(37)
CRIME								
February	.05195	(4)	.05155	(25)	.05172	(3)	.03478	(12)
April	.06024	(5)	.05251	(22)	.08333	(5)	.03125	(10)
June	.11235	(10)	.06557	(28)	.08333	(5)	.05079	(16)
August	.08750	(7)	.06941	(27)	.12281	(7)	.04609	(13)
October	.07692	(6)	.04222	(16)	.07017	(4)	.03717	(10)

Note: Proportions shown are the proportion in each group that mentioned the issue as most important. For example, for the unemployment issue: 0.2913 of the high media use group for whom the issue was defined as obtrusive mentioned unemployment as the most important issue facing the nation.

TABLE 5

Significance of Differences between Proportions for the Test Model and Alternative.

Test:	UNEMPLOYMENT		INFLATION		CRIME	
	Number in Right Direction	Number Significant	Number in Right Direction	Number Significant	Number in Right Direction	Number Significant
L-O > H-O (alt)	5	3	5	2	2	0
L-O > H-N (alt)	5	5	5	3	5	0
L-O > L-N (alt)	5	5	5	4[b]	5	2
H-O > H-N	3	2[a]	2	0	5	3[c]
H-O > L-N	5	2	3	0	5	3[c]
H-N > L-N	2	1	3	0	5	1[d]

Notes: The three critical tests comparing the alternative model with the test model are marked "alt" and are the opposite direction to that indicated.

For each issue, across 5 time periods, the total number of tests for each component of the model is 5. For example, for the unemployment issue for the L-O > H-N comparison: 5/5 tests were in the right direction, and 5/5 were significant at $p < 0.05$

All tests are one-tailed $p < 0.05$, unless otherwise indicated.

a: $p < 0.10$ b: $p < 0.05$ for 2; $p < 0.10$ for 2

c: $p < 0.05$ for 1; $p < 0.10$ for 2 d: $p < 0.10$

As was expected following an examination of the percentage graphs, the data fit the test model better than the alternative model.[9] In the three critical comparisons - L-O/H-O; L-O/H-N; L-O/L-N - the differences are distinct for the unemployment and inflation issues. For these two issues, all the hypotheses are in the right direction for the test model. For unemployment, 13 out of 15 possible tests are significant ($p < 0.05$). For inflation, 9 tests out of a possible 15 are significant (7 at $p < 0.05$ and 2 at $p < 0.10$). For crime, while only 2 tests are significant, 12 are in the hypothesized direction of the test model, despite the small sub-sample sizes.

Discussion:

Based on the data presented here, it appears that for people who have little contact with an issue, and are low media users, the issue is considered of minimal importance. Low media use and low obtrusiveness result in low awareness. Neither personal experience nor media exposure sensitize this group to an issue or public problem.

What is beyond the scope of this study is the role of other factors in the process of building issue awareness. For example, of importance would be the role of interpersonal communication when considering the low media users for whom an issue is non-obtrusive.

The data suggest that obtrusiveness is a powerful factor. People with high contact with an issue do not need the mass media to tell them the issue is important. Over three different issues, at five time periods, there is support for the notion that low mass media users, who have high contact with an issue, consider that issue of much more importance than high mass media users -- and of more importance than low or high media users consider non-obtrusive issues.

For those people who have contact with an issue, high mass media use

may function as a competing force. The media's influence may not be minimal, nor simply reinforcing, for the obtrusive high media group. Rather, the media's influence may divert attention away from the personal experience to the media experience - from the personal realm to the media world, to paraphrase Zucker. While this group does not need the media to tell them the issue is important, they are exposed to a diverse media agenda which may act to pull attention away from personal experience. More research is needed to explore the differences between obtrusive and non-obtrusive issues for high media users. Of further concern would be the interaction of issues - how they rise and fall together, or apart - on the public agenda.

For agenda-setting research, the evidence gives support to the importance of issue obtrusiveness as a contingent condition. The study also points to the usefulness of single issue analysis, and group (rather than aggregate) analysis of salience.

Given the concern with differences between newspapers and television in agenda-setting, (Eyal, 1979; Shaw and McCombs, 1977), further research may be able to determine different media exposure-obtrusiveness interaction models for the two media. The results presented here suggest the differences among the obtrusive and non-obtrusive, high and low media users, are more exaggerated for newspapers.

It should be noted that the results apply to the use of news content in a political campaign setting. Do these findings apply to non-campaign periods, or to content other than news? This distinction may be critical for the heavy television viewer.

The findings presented here are tentative and subject to obvious limitations. Given the nature of the available data it has not been possible to explore the interaction between issue obtrusiveness and media exposure. The operational definition of issue obtrusiveness used here is necessarily restrictive. What is needed for future research is a better measure of this concept. A better measure of issue salience at the individual level is also required. This analysis has also failed to consider the role of interpersonal communication, identified by Erbring et. al. as a critical factor. By not following the traditional approach in agenda-setting research, comparisons similar to those made by Eyal (1979) in his dissertation are not possible.

If salience does vary for individual issues, and across individuals, then what is suggested for the future is both individual (rather than group, or aggregate) analyses of issue salience, and single issue analyses[10] (rather than aggregate), across time. In the McCombs and Shaw (1980) typology this would be a Type IV approach, and consistent with the Erbring et. al. suggestion of micro-level analyses.

NOTES

1. Some research has considered media and public agenda composed of items other than public issues or problems. See for example, Weaver, Becker and McCombs, 1976.

2. It can be argued that Iyengar has not convincingly demonstrated this point. The fact that there is a high correlation between the publication of government economic data and both audience and network television agenda does not necessarily bolster the case. What is of importance here is the finding that agenda-setting effects were not evident for what appear to be "obtrusive" issues.

3. Traditionally, agenda-setting research has attempted to match aggregate measures of public salience of a set of issues with a set of issues mentioned by the media. The Erbring et. al. approach, and concern for factors other than media exposure, is consistent with the McCombs and Shaw (1980) research typology and suggestions for a transactional model of agenda-setting effects.

4. See Erbring et. al. (1980), footnote, p. 18.

5. The idea for this model comes from a graduate seminar on agenda-setting conducted by Dr. Maxwell McCombs. See also McCombs and Shaw (1980) for a discussion of issue obtrusiveness, and a proposed transactional model of agenda-setting effects.

6. Excluding the obtrusive group for the unemployment issue should help eliminate any contamination of the inflation group. The importance of issue interaction is mentioned in the discussion of the findings.

7. The media use section of the questionnaire contained questions on general media use which were used in assessing responses to the two specific news exposure questions. The interest here is in attention to news content. The cut-off for high newspaper use was regular; and for high television news use, five evenings watched.

8. Respondents who were low newspaper users and low television users were defined as low media users. Combinations of high or low newspaper with low or high television use were defined as high media users of news content.

9. The limitation here is that the data do not permit exploration of the interaction between issue obtrusiveness and media exposure.

10. Two recent articles have demonstrated the usefulness of single issue analyses: Winter and Eyal (1980); Winter, Eyal and Rogers, (1980)

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